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OBSERVATIONS ON NESTING WHITE-TAILED HAWKS

by

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During the period 16 July to 20 August 1977, I observed and photographed adult and young of the White-tailed Hawk (*Buteo albicaudatus*), at a nest on Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Texas. Observation began when 2 young were approximately 2 days old, and continued at 7 day intervals. A 500 mm telephoto lens and 35 mm camera were used to photograph and observe the birds.

The nest was a platform of woody stems placed between two branches of a Spanish dagger or Spanish bayonet (*Yucca treculeans*), 2.7 m above the ground. The nest was about 1 km west of Laguna Madre Bay on an open ridge among scattered mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) and Spanish dagger. Observations were made from a blind 2.7 m above the ground, approximately 18 m from the nest.

During my first visit (16 July) I saw only one nestling. By 23 July both young were active and one was visibly larger than the other. When they were being fed, the larger one became dominant and maneuvered into a position to receive most of the food when it was in limited quantity. When feeding was first observed (23 July), the smaller nestling was too weak to sit erect for more than a few seconds, while the larger sibling was erect and prepared to take most of the food brought to the nest. By 30 July there were still signs of dominance, although the size difference was no longer recognizable. On 13 August and 20 August the young fed themselves from prey left at the nest.

The adults were seen during each of my visits, which extended from before sunrise (time unknown) until 1200-1400 hours. From daylight until approximately 0930 hours both perched on Spanish dagger plants 20-50 m from the nest. I assumed these sites were used as night roosts. The adult hawks left their perches, presumably to hunt, during mid-morning (0930 - 1030 hours). One adult invariably returned with food between 1030 and 1100 hours. After feeding the young or depositing its catch in the nest, the adult again perched and preened at or near the nest for varying periods.

I was not able to identify all of the prey, but at least 7 different species were eaten by the young including: eastern yellow-bellied racer (*Coluber constrictor flaviventris*), western ribbon snake (*Thamnophis proximus*), Texas horned lizard (*Phrynosoma cornutum*), Mexican ground squirrel (*Citellus mexicanus*), cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus floridanus*), blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*), and an unidentified small, long-tailed rodent.

During my last two visits, when the young were estimated at between 30 and 37 days of age, they frequently alternated between stretching and flapping their wings. The young used the nest edge and its supporting branches as exercising perches. Exercising included extending the wings to catch the wind and then springing into the air, hovering momentarily over the perch, alighting, and hovering again.

The 2 young were still in the nest at my final visit on 20 August.